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ABSTRACT

This article aims to discover the latent organization of a text by revealing a semantically motivated pattern of language functions that inform the theme of a story. it is shown how this pattern of linguistic features in the text provides insights into the literary effects of a description of a scene of a novel. The analysis proposed follows the systemic-functional framework, with an emphasis on the manner in which the processes and the participants in process are represented in the text. In other words, the focus of the analysis is the ideational component of the grammar, the grammar of transitivity. (Contains 3 references.) (JL)

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Semantic options in the transitivity system: An example of textual analysis

by Julia Lavid

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SEMANTIC OPTIONS IN THE TRANSITIVITY SYSTEM: AN EXAMPLE OF TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

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1. Introduction

Analysing any piece of discourse within a functional framework implies a recognition of the dynamic relation between signifiers and signifieds, form and function in language. The task of the functional analyst is to watch how meanings are meant, that is, to discover the relation between meaning and wordings that accounts for the organization of linguistic features in a text.

My aim in this article is to discover the latent organization of a text by revealing a semantically motivated pattern of language functions which inform the theme of a story. I hope to show how this pattern of linguistic features in the text provides insights into the literary effects of a description of a scene in a novel. The analysis proposed follows the systemic-functional framework, with an emphasis on the manner in which processes and the participants in processes are represented in the text; that is, my focus is the ideational component of the grammmar, the grammar of transitivity.

As Hopper & Thompson (1980: 251) point out, transitivity, when understood as a global property of a whole clause in which an activity is 'transferred' from an agent to a patient, is a crucial relationship in language. The authors have identified several

parameters of transitivity and proposed a scale according to which clauses can be ranked as more or less transitive. These parameters are: participants, kinesis, aspect, punctuality, volitionality, affirmation, mode, agency, affectedness and individuation of the object. 'High transitivity' includes the presence of 2 or more participants, the agent and the object, with respect to the parameter participants; with respect to kinesis, aspect, and punctuality, it includes features such as 'action', 'telic', and 'punctual', respectively; on the other hand, 'low transitivity' is associated with the opposite features: 1 participant, non-action, atelic, non-punctual, and so on. The idea is then that the more features a clause has in the 'high transitivity' column, the more transitive it is.

However, the semantic and grammatical characteristics of individual clauses -among which transitivity is a nuclear one- can only gain a provisional an incomplete validity at sentence level, since a coherent account for the salience of those features is to be found in discourse, specifically in the contrast between foregrounded and backgrounded discourse. High transitivity features, according to these authors, are typically associated with FOREGROUND Information (the material which supplies the main points of discourse) whereas low transitivity features combine with BACKGROUND material (that part of discourse which does not crucially contribute to the speaker's goal, but which merely amplifies, or comments on it). In English, however, the correlation between foregrounding and high transitivity is interpreted on a probabilistic basis, that is, no absolute marking can be aprioristically assigned to it. Nonetheless, it seems very likely that a clause will be interpreted as foregrounded when it encodes more (rather than fewer) transitivity features.

Here this perspective will be used to discuss a passage taken from Melville's novella *Billy Budd*. There are some interesting literary effects achieved through transitivity and grounding concerning the central characters, and the scene is thus a seminal one in the novel.

2. General assumptions

If, as Freeman (1948: 73) suggests, structurally, the three characters *are* the novel, any analysis ought to begin with some consideration of the three principal actors. Violent action and external description in the story are subordinated to the inner conflicts of three men: the innocent, ignorant foretopman, handsome Billy Budd; the devious, urbane master-at-arms, John Claggart; the respectable, bookish commanding officer, Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax ('Starry') Vere.

Billy is frequently presented as the main character of the piece. He is the "Handsome Sailor" and "Nautical Murat", "a superior figure of his own class accepting the spontaneous homage of his shipmates" (Hayford & Sealts 1962: 53). But he is not a conventional hero, and Melville knows it: he could be all that but he fails, he cannot qualify as a spokesman; he is extremely naive, suffering the tragic fault of a stammer. He is an ironic figure, as is Captain Vere. Claggart is the very image of intellectualized evil, but he uses reason as "an ambidexter implement for effecting the irrational" (Hayford & Sealts 1962: 77). Billy inspires him both "profound antipathy" and a "soft yearning". He is thus a personification of ambiguity and ambivalence, of the separation between being and doing: "apprehending the good, but powerless to be it, a nature like Claggart's,... what recourse is left to it bu to recoil upon itself" (Hayford & Sealts 1962: 78). Captain Vere is also presented as an ambivalent character: aware of the evil in Claggart, and considering Billy's killing of him the blow of an angel, he rules out all inquiry into the motives for Billy's act and insists that he be tried for striking and killing an officer.

Much of the existing critical disagreement over the story is due to Melville's ambivalence in the presentation of the characters. My claim is that this ambivalence is reflected in the way the text is linguistically organized, more precisely, in the way transitivity options (types of processes and participants) and grounding mirror Melville's conception of his characters. The particular scene analysed occurs at the beginning of Chapter XIX when Billy, falsely accused by Claggart of plotting mutiny aboard the

British man-of-war Bellipotent, his speech impeded by a stutter, strikes his accuser dead in front of the Captain. For this reason he will be condemned to hang after a summary trial:

(1) Now when the foretopman found himself in the cabin, closeted as it were, with the captain and Claggart, (2) he was surprised enough. (3) But it was a surprise unaccompanied by apprehension or distrust. (4) To an immature nature essentially honest and humane, forewarning intimations of subtler danger from one's kind come tardily if at all. (5) The only thing that took shape in the young sailor's mind was this: Yes, the captain, I have always thought, looks kindly upon me. Wonder if he is going to make me his coxswain. I should like that. And may be now he is going to ask the master-at-arms about me.

"Shut the door there, sentry," (6) said the commander; "stand without, and let nobody come in. -Now, Master-at-arms, tell this man to his face what you told of him to me," (7) and stood prepared to scrutinize the mutually confronting visages.

(8) With the measured step and calm collected air of an asylum physician approaching in the public hall some patient beginning to show indications of a coming paroxysm, (9) Claggart deliberately advanced within short range of Billy and, (10) mesmerically looking him in the eye, (11) briefly recapitulated the accusation. (12) Not at first did Billy take it in. (13) When he did, (14) the rose-tan of his cheek looked struck as by white leprosy. (15) He stood like one impaled and gagged. (16) Meanwhile the accuser's eyes, (17) removing not as yet from the blue dilated ones, underwent a phenomenal change, their wonted rich violet color blurring into a muddy purple. (18) Those lights of human intelligence, (19) losing human expression, were gelidly protruding like the alien eyes of certain uncatalogued creatures of the deep. (20) The first mesmeric glance was one of serpent fascination; (21) the last was as the paralyzing lurch of the torpedo fish.

(22) "Speak, man!" said Captain Vere to the transfixed one, struck by his aspect even more than by Claggart's. "Speak! Defend yourself!" (23) Which appeal caused but a strange dumb gesturing and gurgling in Billy; amazement at such an accusation so suddenly sprung on inexperienced nonage; (24) this, and, it may be, horror for the accuser's eyes serving to bring out his lurking defect (25) and in this instance for the time intensifying it into a convulsed tongue-tie; (26) while the intent head and entire form straining forward in an agony of ineffectual eagerness to obey the injunction to speak and defend himself, gave an expression to the face like that of a condemned vestal priestess in the moment of being buried alive, and in the first struggle against suffocation.

(27) Though at the time Captain Vere was quite ignorant of Billy's liability to vocal impediment, (28) he now immediately divined it, (29) since vividly Billy's aspect recalled to him that of a bright young schoolmate of his whom he had once seen struck by much the same startling impotence in the act of eagerly rising in the class to be foremost in response to a testing question put to it by the master. (30) Going close up to the young sailor, (31) and laying a soothing hand on his shoulder, (32) he said, "There is no hurry, my boy. Take your time, take your time."

(33) Contrary to the effect intended, these words so fatherly in tone, doubtless touching Billy's heart to the quick, prompted yet more violent efforts at utterance -

(34) efforts soon ending for the time in confirming the paralysis, (35) and bringing to his face an expression which was a crucifixion to behold. (36) The next instant, quick as the flame form a discharged cannon at night, his right arm shot out, (37) and Claggart dropped to the deck. (38) Whether intentionally or but owing to the young athlete's superior height, (39) the blow had taken effecto full upon the forehead, so shapely and intellectual-looking a feature in the master-at-arms; (40) so that the body fell over lengthwise, (41) like a heavy plank tilted from erectness. (42) A gasp or two, (43) and he lay motionless.

(44) "Fated boy," breathed Captain Vere in tone so low as to be almost a whisper, "what have you done! But here, help me."

(45) The twain raised the felled one from the loins up into a sitting position. (46) The spare form flexibly acquiesced, but inertly. (47) It was like handling a dead snake. (48) They lowered it back. (49) Regaining erectness, Captain Vere with one hand covering his face stood to all appearance as impassive as the object at his feet. (50) Was he absorbed in taking in all the bearings of the event (51) and what was best not only now at once to be done, but also in the sequel?

(52) Slowly he uncovered his face; (53) and the effect was as if the moon emerging from eclipse should reappear with quite another aspect than that which had gone into hiding. (54) The father in him, manifested towards Billy thus far in the scene, was replaced by the military disciplinarian. (55) In his official tone he bade the foretopman retire to a stateroom aft (ponting it out), and there remain till thence summoned. (56) This order Billy in silence mechanically obeyed. (57) Then going to the cabin door where it opened on the quarter-deck, (58) Captain Vere said to the sentry without, "Tell somebody to send Albert here." (59) When the lad appeared, (60) his master so contrived it that he should not catch sight of the prone one, (61) "Albert," he said to him, "tell the surgeon I wish to see him. You need not come back till called."

(The following passage is taken from the reading text based on Melville's genetic text and prepared by Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts in 1962. All references to the text in the present paper are to this edition.)

3. Textual analysis

We may begin our analysis with a study of the times Billy is involved as a participant in the processes expressed by the verbs. Seven of them are all processes in which Billy is not the Agent or initiator of the events: Billy is the Recipient of a material process in (4), where he is not even presented as animate, definite or referential, but is only indirectly referred to as 'an immature nature': *To an immature nature..., forwarning intimations ... come tardily if at all.* (4).

The next clause is a metaphorical expression realized by a material process with an inanimate agent where Billy does not even play the role of participant: his mind is presented as a circumstantial element of the location type: *The only thing that took shape in the young sailor's mind was ...* (5). Three further references to Billy's subsequent reactions to Vere's appeal repeat the same kind of structure: *a strange gesturing and gurgling in Billy; amazement at such an accusation ... horror for the accuser's eyes.* (23-24). Relegated to an oblique status, as indicated by the use of the prepositional phrase *in Billy*, he is presented as a low individuated or affected participant in the clause. Moreover, the use of nominalized forms to realize processes tends to blurr both person and tense specifications, contributing to a timeless, static, and spatial description of the events. In addition to this, since nominalizations are extremely low in transitivity - they never make assertions, their verbs are always irrealis - (Hopper & Thompson 1980: 285), its specific use in these clauses emphasizes Billy's passive role in the scene. These nominal forms are by their nature backgrounded, since they serve as a noun phrase in the sentences of which they are part.

Billy's role of Patient participant is confirmed afterwards when Vere's fatherly words provoke again a negative reaction in Billy: *these words, doubtless touching Billy's heart to the quick, prompted yet more violent efforts at utterance -efforts soon ending for the time in confirming the paralysis, and bringing to his face an expression which was a crucifixion to behold.* (33-35).

There are ten clauses coding Billy as a participant in the role of an Agent. Six of them avoid explicit reference to Billy as causer or initiator of the action, and parts of his body take on the role of Agent: *the rose-tan of his cheek looked struck as by white leprosy* (14); *while the intent head and entire form straining forward... to obey...., gave an expression to the face like that of a condemned vestal priestess* (26); *his right arm shot out* (36). The use of these non-agentive subjects - with the lowest score in the Agency Hierarchy - reflects Billy's low degree of planned involvement in the activity expressed

by the verb. Billy does not perform actions nor does he deliberately initiate events. With regard to grounding, these clauses are obviously backgrounded: participants low in Agency cannot effect a transfer of an action in the same way as those high in Agency. Passive constructions, e.g.: *the rose-tan of his cheek looked struck as by white leprosy* (14), and imperfective forms, e.g.: *while the intent head and entire form straining forward...* (26) are non-transitive, and therefore backgrounded.

One further reference to Billy's unintentional blow serves to strengthen the overall impression of detachment, of someone who is not responsible for his actions: *the blow had taken effecto full upon the forehead* (39). This time, the combination of a non-volitional verb and a non-agentive subject point to an absence of voluntary participation by Billy.

There are only five clauses describing Billy as an Agent. Three of them are intransitive, i.e., they are used without a goal, and are passive or reactive in the sense that the processes are not initiated by Billy, who is the affected participant, not the causer: *when the foretopman found himself in the cabin* (1); *he was surprised enough* (2); *he stood like one impaled and gagged* (15). All three are clauses which realize one argument, a feature associated with low transitivity, and backgrounded. Besides, the first clause (1) has a verb in the reflexive form which makes the clause less transitive than a possible counterpart with two distinct arguments (Hopper & Thompson 1980: 277).

Only two more clauses encode Billy as an Agent: *Not at first did Billy take it in* (12); *This order Billy in silence mechanically obeyed* (56). In the first clause Billy is the Senser of the mental process expressed by the verb. Mental processes are lower in transitivity than material ones since they lack the kinetic property typical of high transitive clauses (Hopper & Thompson 1980: 252). Moreover, the participant functioning as Phenomenon is not a 'thing' but a 'fact' (Claggart's accusation) and, therefore, low individuated and non-referential. Objects of this type tend to reduce the

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transitivity of the clause, and make it backgrounded. The second clause appears at the end of the passage. Claggart is now dead and Vere orders Billy to retire aft and remain there till summoned. This is the only occasion in the whole passage where Billy is the Actor and initiator of a material-action-intention process. However, his action is a reaction to Vere's order rather than the result of a free and voluntary decision. Billy obeys mechanically, as if he were a robot, someone unable to carry out any action on his own. Similarly we can find two past participles with an obvious passive meaning; they summarize Billy's role in the passage as an unconscious Agent, who, driven by an unknown force which he is unable to bring under control, fatally provokes Claggart's death.

Both references are made by Captain Vere: the first is the result of the reaction which Claggart's accusation provokes in Billy: *the transfixed one* (22); the second occurs immediately after the blow has been delivered: *fated boy* (44). This last description underlines Billy's fatal destiny, and his lack of responsibility in the course of events leadingto Claggart's tragic end.

As for Claggart's role in the passage, he is the Agent in five clauses, but only in one of them he is the Actor of a material-action-intention process: *Claggart deliberately advanced within short range of Billy* (9); *mesmerically looking him in the eye* (10); *briefly recapitulated the accusation* (11); *Claggart dropped to the deck* (37); *he lay motionless* (43).

The process in (10) is of the behavioural type. Processes of this kind are intermediate between material and mental processes, but 'look' is, in this case, closer to the mental end, since it is a process of consciousness represented as a form of behaviour. The clause is thus low in transitivity, and it is also backgrounded: the material presented in -ing clauses in English is not part of the narration, but simply adds supplementary detail, or is a comment on it. Verbal processes like the one in (11) are also low in transitivity since they are in a sense 'symbolic' processes lacking a definite and referential object.

The process in the case of (37) is realized by a 'supervention' verb, that is, a verb describing a change which can be observed or which affects the actor but over which he has no control. Although the verb is active, it expresses a happening rather than a doing: the probe would be "what happened to Claggart?" and not "what did Claggart do?". Finally, the verb in (43) describes a relational process of the attributive type, where Claggart is the affected participant of an action initiated by Billy's blow. Attributive clauses have only one participant, the Carrier, and represent states, not actions. These two features are a signal of their reduced transitivity and reflect their backgrounded nature.

If we follow the succession of events leading to Claggart's death, we will notice that soon after the first three moments (9, 10, 11), where he is the intentional initiator of the clause, Claggart, unexpectedly, undergoes a transformation which makes him unaware of his actions. This is reflected in the use of a series of 'supervention' verbs whose actors are parts of his body: *the accuser's eyes... underwent a phenomenal change* (17 ; *Those lights of human intelligence, losing human expression, were gelidly protruding* (18).

Two further references also avoid explicit reference to Claggart as Agent. We are not told: 'Claggart glanced at Billy mesmerically', but: *the first mesmeric glance was one of serpent fascination; the last was as the paralyzing lurch of the torpedo fish.* (20, 21). This time, as in the description of Billy's reaction to Vere's appeal, Melville presents the process in a nominalized form within a relational-attributive clause. These clauses provide a static description of the events in the sense that they do not show us Claggart acting, and serve to emphasize the general impression of detachment. It is as if Claggart's eyes, now transformed into those of an alien creature, had a force of their own, detached from their owner.

When Billy's right arm has already delivered the fatal blow Claggart appears again in the scene, but this time as a non-agentive subject: *the body fell over lengthwise* (40); *the*

spare form flexibly acquiesced (46). In both occasions, Melville introduces an inanimate subject to emphasize the low agency of the participant. Moreover, a third reference presents Claggart as the goal of a process whose actors are Vere and Billy: the twain raised the felled one (45). In all of these examples the use of non-volitional verbs shows an absence of voluntary participation and confirms Claggart's passivity in the events.

What about Captain Vere? There are twenty references to Vere as a participant in the processes, and in all of them he plays the role of Agent. The types of processes involved are the following: six verbs describe verbal processes: *said* (6); *said* (22); *he said* (32); *he bade* (55); *said* (58); *he said* (61). Five verbs describe material-action-intention processes: *going up close to him* (30); *laying a soothing hand* (31); *covering his face* (49); *slowly he uncovered his face* (52); *going to the cabin door* (57). Four verbs describe mental processes, three of them cognitive: *divined* (28); *taking in all the bearings* (50); *contrived* (60); one reactive: *recalled* (29).

Four verbs describe relational processes: *was quite ignorant* (27); *stood as impassive* (49); *was he absorbed* (50) ; was replaced (54); and one is a behavioural process: *breathed* (44).

4. Conclusion

This analysis shows that, although at first sight Vere seems to be quite in the background, as a kind of a 'passive' observer, he is, nevertheless, the leader and controller of events. This is obvious if we look at the content of the story: it is Vere who arranges the meeting between Claggart and Billy, who orders Claggart to repeat his accusation and Billy to speak and defend himself, and whose words, contrary to the effect intended, provoke Billy's unintentional blow. This is reflected not only in the fact that Vere dominates the action of the passage (twenty references where he appears as Agent) but also in the type of processes involved: most of his actions are material-action-

intention processes or verbal processes; interestingly, these actions are external manifestations of a series of mental processes which characterize Vere's personality. While Billy and Claggart are said to owe their characters to 'nature', Captain Vere is shaped mainly by his fondness for books. Billy's intelligence is as primitive as his virtues are pristine. He is illiterate, he cannot understand ambiguity, and he stutters. Claggart, in contrast, is presented as the very image of urbane, intellectualized, articulate evil. He is a man, writes Melville, "in whom was the mania of an evil nature, not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living, but born with him and humane, in short, a depravity according to nature" (Hayford & Sealts 1962: 76). The mere sight of Billy Budd's rosy beauty and rollicking innocence does not fail to provoke in such a character "an antipathy spontaneous and profound". Vere, the third man in the drama, is an honest, serious reader, seemingly well suited for the role of a judge and a witness that he will come to play in the course of the story. Nevertheless, Vere sees his actions and existence as meaningful only within the context of a contractual allegiance: his allegiance to the King. This is reflected in Vere's judgement of the events leading to Claggart's death. Although the recognizes that Billy has been driven by a fatal destiny, and that his deed has been accidental or unconsciously motivated, however, he forces through the death sentence against Billy by accusing him directly: *"Fated boy", breathed Captain Vere in tone so low as to be almost a whisper, "what have you done!"* (44). Even though he feels sorry for Billy and considers him a good boy, unable to kill anyone intentionally, Vere subordinates character to action, being to doing. For him, Budd's intent or non-intent is nothing to the purpose; what matters is not the cause but the consequences of the blow. Thus, for Vere, judgement is a function neither of the individual conscience nor of absolute justice, but of 'the rigor of martial law' operating through him (Hayford & Sealts 1962: 112).

Interestingly enough, the fate of each of the characters is the direct reverse of what one is led to expect from their 'nature'. Billy is sweet, innocent, and harmless, yet he kills.

Claggart is evil, perverted, and mendacious, yet he dies as a victim. Vere is sagacious and responsible, yet he allows a man whom he considers not guilty to hang. It is this discrepancy between character and action, between a man's nature and his acts, that has provoked so much critical disagreement over the story, and which I have tried to illustrate with the analysis of the preceding passage. By selecting certain processes and participants from the transitivity system, Melville has constructed a semantically motivated pattern which reveals the roles of the characters and the reasons for their actions in a crucial scene of the novel.

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